

Hidden Voices: Lulu's Story



Below is the 18th in a series of blog posts created by adults who have lived experience of parental imprisonment. By sharing these hidden voices, we hope to show how the impacts of parental imprisonment can stay with people well into adulthood.

My dad went to prison when I was seven years old, and police involvement started when I was three. He was in and out of different prisons all throughout my childhood – until 2019, so I grew up around prisons. I spent pretty much all my childhood in prisons, that was my life. It really does stay with you, it's not something that ever leaves you. The trauma from all of that is something that you live with every day. I wake up and go to work, but in the back of my head I'm still that kid. It affects everything in your life.

When I was going to visit, I met other children who had a parent in prison. I'll be honest with you, it was nice. It was nice to meet other kids who were going through the same thing. We used to visit, our parents would talk – and we'd go off and play. I could relate to those kids – I couldn't relate to the kids at my school.

I used to have a lot of friends, but a lot of friends turned against me when my dad went to prison. I've only still got one friend who stood by me through everything. Nobody wanted to come over to my house, no one wanted to come to my parties anymore. It was just me and my family. Now, I find it very difficult to form new friendships, because when I needed friends they weren't there.

When I was eight, I arrived at school one day and this girl in my class came over to me and said 'you're not invited to my birthday party because your dad's a criminal.' I knew everything about what he'd done, but to me he wasn't a criminal, he wasn't a monster. He was my dad. I went home and I told my mum what had happened. The mother of this kid came round to our house and said 'she didn't mean it' 'she didn't mean to say it like that.' And my mum replied 'she knew very well what she was saying, and she heard it from you.' Children don't come up with things like that by themselves.

When my dad went to prison, a lot of my teachers started behaving differently towards me too, to the point where my mum had to have a sit down meeting with the headmaster. I got a lot of questions, a lot of them trying to ask me about the crime my dad had committed. I used to have really bad breakdowns at school. I'd just start crying in class, and then leave. I remember feeling really excluded, nobody understood. You're completely innocent, and yet

you feel like you've done something wrong. I felt more normal going to a prison than I did going to school.

While my dad was in prison, my mum was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was also suffering with depression. There was stress from my dad, worry from my mum, it just didn't really seem to end to be honest.

My family were always really honest with me, they told me he went to prison, I knew where he'd gone. They couldn't really hide it as there was a lot of media involvement, it was in every single newspaper at the time. I lived on the same street as my school, so when our house was getting raided by the police, everyone would see the police cars outside my house. It was plastered all over the papers. They published my family's name, took pictures of our house, and even put us under surveillance. It was everywhere. My mum took me to a horse show when I was eight, and they followed me and my mum with huge cameras, taking pictures of us. It was horrific.

A lot of people like to speculate, and the media play such a massive part in this. When people read something, they tend to believe it. The media fabricated so much of my dad's story, it was unbelievable. I constantly had my back up, because you never know what people are going to say next. My surname is very uncommon – so in Scotland when you heard my surname, everyone would know. I would go to the doctors, and someone would come out and say my name, and then everybody would stop and look because they recognised the name.

I understand what my dad did, but it's not my sentence. He did his time and as a family we stood by him and supported him. But it wasn't me. We didn't do what he did. I saw my mum lose her own friends after he went to prison. People turned their back on our family because they didn't want to be associated with a 'criminal'. Whereas the reality is that families and children in that situation need your support at that moment more than ever.

As you're going through it, you're just dealing with everything that gets thrown at you. The media on top of you, trying to keep up with school, trying to live a normal life, trying to visit your dad in prison, trying to balance everything really. It's only now that I stop and realise 'what was that?'

If I had had somebody relatable, specifically for me, to be there for me and walk me through things so a seven-year-old can understand, it would have helped so much. I was scared of opening up because I was painted with a lot of judgement. I didn't know who to trust. The procedure and rules for prison are written and presented for an adult to understand.

I understand it's a prison but if you look at it from a seven year old's point of view, it's confusing because you're thinking 'what have I done?' There are sniffer dogs, people demanding to check under your mouth, people searching you wherever. Children need somebody they can turn to and say 'that part of the visit made me feel a bit uncomfortable', or 'why did they do this?' That child is carrying a massive burden. There might be days the child doesn't want to go to the prison, but they have to go, because if they don't, they won't see their parent for god knows how long.

The support needs to be consistent. What happens after release? What is there for that child who has grown up in the criminal justice system, who you now expect to live a perfectly normal life? When a crime is committed, the support goes to the offender, the support goes to the victim. But what about the families?

Children are very good at pretending, they're good at covering up their emotions. I know that for a fact because I used to do it all the time. They don't want to upset their family, they just want to keep things as normal as possible. Even my family to this day don't know the struggles I went through managing all of that. I didn't want to come home and cry, I'd been crying all day at school. I didn't want to come home and tell my mum that I'd had a bad day, if she'd been speaking to lawyers all day, or had been in bed with depression.

I want to use what I've been through to help. Awareness of parental imprisonment has to improve, because it affects so many aspects of your life and people just don't realise. I was a seven-year-old that had lost her dad to the criminal justice system. He deserved to go, I'm not saying he didn't, but what I am saying is that there needs to be more support and understanding for the children.